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**Translocal assemblages:  
space, power and social movements**

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## Abstract

In this paper, I deploy an analytic of 'translocal assemblage' as a means for conceptualising space and power in social movements. I offer a relational topology that is open to how actors within movements construct different spatial imaginaries and practices in their work. In using the pre-fix 'translocal', I am signifying three orientations. First, translocal assemblages are composites of place-based social movements which exchange ideas, knowledge, practices, materials and resources across sites. Second, assemblage is an attempt to emphasise that translocal social movements are more than just the connections between sites. Sites in translocal assemblages have more depth than the notion of 'node' or 'point' suggests - as connoted by network - in terms of their histories, the labour required to produce them, and their inevitable capacity to exceed the connections between other groups or places in the movement. Third, they are not simply a spatial category, output, or resultant formation, but signify doing, performance and events. I examine the potential of assemblage to offer an alternative account to that of the 'network', the predominant and often *de facto* concept used in discussions of the spatiality of social movements. I draw on examples from one particular translocal assemblage based in and beyond Mumbai which campaigns on housing within informal settlements: Slum/Shack Dwellers International.

**Keywords:** translocal assemblage; space; power; social movement; relationality.

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## **Introduction**

This paper explores whether and how the notion of ‘assemblage’ might begin to offer a distinct conceptualisation of spatiality in social movements. It seeks to offer an alternative to the dominance of ‘network’ for conceptualising the spatiality of social movements. While I find network a useful notion and have used it in the past (McFarlane, 2006), in this paper I consider how the notion of assemblage might present a different conceptualisation of space in social movements than network. This in turn highlights some issues and questions that the language of network does not quite manage to address. This is not to suggest that network is not a useful notion, or indeed to suggest that assemblage is without problems, but to examine the relations between social movements, space and assemblage as a theoretical problem that may be productive of different lines of inquiry. My impetus for doing so is my own sense of dissatisfaction with the language of network – or, indeed, scale – for conceptualising the spatialities of urban social movements that I have been researching in Mumbai, India, and which I will draw upon in the main body of the paper.

In recent years, there has been an increasing use of the term ‘assemblage’ in geographical scholarship. The sources and uses of assemblage have varied considerably. In large part, its use reflects the more general redefinition of ‘the social’ as materially heterogeneous, practice-based, emergent and processual. If the obvious reference points here for geographers include actor-network theory (Latour, 2004; 2005; Law and Hassard, 1999) and nonrepresentational theory (e.g. Thrift, 2007), there has been a wide variety of uses of the term assemblage in geography that seeks to blur modernist conceptions of space, including divides of nature-culture, body-technology, or physical-political. For example, urban geography has witnessed a surfeit of work on urban siconatures, cyborg urbanisms, or urban metabolisms (e.g. Gandy, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2006), which

sometimes deploy the notion of assemblage. This use of assemblage tends to be largely descriptive, and is echoed beyond geography – witness, for instance, Sassen’s (2007) use of assemblage in *Territory, Authority, Rights* as an exploration of how particular mixes of technical and administrative practices extract and give intelligibility to new space by territorialising and deterritorialising milieu<sup>1</sup>.

More specifically, assemblage appears to be increasingly used to emphasise three inter-related sets of processes. First, assemblage emphasises gathering, coherence and dispersion. In particular, this draws attention to the labour of assembling and re-assembling sociomaterial practices that are diffuse, tangled and contingent (see for instance Allen and Cochrane, 2008). In this respect, assemblage emphasises spatiality *and* temporality: elements are drawn together at a particular conjuncture only to disperse or realign, and the shape shifts – as anthropologist Tania Murray Li (2007: 265) has put it – according to place and the ‘angle of vision’. Second, assemblage connotes groups, collectives and, by extension, distributed agencies. As Jane Bennett (2005) has persuasively argued, assemblage names an uneven topography of trajectories that cross or engage each other to different extents over time, and which themselves exceed the assemblage. This raises questions about where causality and responsibility lie in assemblage, and about how they should be conceived (I will return to this in the conclusion). Third, following Li (2007), in contrast to Foucauldian notions like

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<sup>1</sup> There is of course a longer and more complex history of assemblage to be written here, the disparate elements of which may or may not be connected. Most obviously, this includes the Deleuzian reading of assemblage as a multiplicity that exceeds its component parts but which nonetheless retains elements of specificity. There are other traditions of usage. For example, assemblage is used in archaeology to denote a group of different artefacts found in the same context, while in biology the term is used to connote micro- or macro-formations, such as the vertebrate skeletal muscle.

apparatus, regime, or governmental technology, assemblage connotes emergence rather than resultant formation. Part of the appeal of assemblage, it would seem, lies in its reading of power as multiple co-existences – assemblage connotes not a central governing power, nor a power distributed equally, but power as plurality in transformation (I will elaborate on this later).

One particularly useful example of these three specific uses of assemblage is Ong and Collier's (2005) edited collection, *Global Assemblages*, which focuses on the specific articulation of 'global forms' as territorialised assemblages. For Collier and Ong (2005: 4), assemblages are material, collective and discursive relationships, and in focussing on the specificities of global forms in particular sites they are interested in the formation and reformation of assemblages as political and ethical "anthropological problems". 'Global forms' are phenomena that are distinguished by their "capacity for decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life" (Collier and Ong, 2005: 7). These forms can 'code' heterogenous contexts and objects, but are themselves limited and contested, and it is this process that for them produces assemblages. Global forms can include, for example, neoliberalism, international regulations and standards, the nation, class, citizenship, democracy, or certain ethical problems (e.g. access to water, or malnutrition).

In an important passage, Collier and Ong (2005: 12) clarify the relation between global form and assemblage, including the question of their spatial templates:

In relationship to 'the global', the assemblage is not a 'locality' to which broader forces are counterposed. Nor is it the structural effect of such forces. An assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always

involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake. As a composite concept, the term 'global assemblage' suggests inherent tensions: global implies broadly encompassing, seamless and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial and situated.

This passage is a useful clarification, particularly in its emphasis on assemblage as a composite and emergent concept. Any yet, despite their stated intention of avoiding characterising forms as 'global' and assemblages as 'local', assemblage is substantiated in this account as a set of 'reflective practices' through which global forms are subjected to critical questioning (Stark, 2002). In this move, the distinction between 'global' and 'assemblage' resurfaces. It is in this context that I am using the prefix 'translocal' as an attempt to blur, if not bypass, the scalar distinction between local and global (and in this sense, to also move beyond the provocative but peculiarly scalar distinction of assemblage found in De Landa's (2006) ontology, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*).

In using the analytic 'translocal assemblage', I am signifying three orientations. First, they are composites of place-based social movements which exchange ideas, knowledge, practices, materials and resources across sites. Second, translocal assemblage is an attempt to emphasise that translocal social movements are more than just the connections between sites. Sites in translocal assemblages have more depth than the notion of 'node' or 'point' suggests (as connoted by network) in terms of their histories, the labour required to produce them, and their inevitable capacity to exceed the connections between other groups or places in the movement. Third, they are not simply a spatial category, output, or resultant formation, but signify doing, performance and events. At different moments of time, these relations within and between sites may require different kinds of labour and are more or less vulnerable to collapse, or to

reassembling in different forms. As Bennett (2005: 461) points out, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1986), this underlines the agency not just of each member of the assemblage, but of the groupings themselves: the milieu, or specific arrangement of things, through which forces and trajectories inhere and transform.

These three orientations offer a potentially distinct conceptualisation of spatiality from that of ‘network’ in accounts of social movements. Network has become the predominant lens through which to conceive social movements. For example, della Porta and Diani (1999: 14, cited in Nicholls, 2008: 844) state that “networks contribute both to creating the preconditions for mobilization and to providing the proper setting for the elaboration of specific world-views and lifestyles” (see also Diani and McAdam, 2003). Cumbers *et al* (2008: 184), in their excellent account of ‘global justice networks’, develop a critical account of network ontology in relation to what they see as the “flatter, decentred, topological networks in much of the literature about an emergent global civil society”, while Featherstone *et al* (2007) explore how a ‘network perspective’ helps to theorise transnationalism, including in relation to social movements. Juris (2008), in a brilliant ethnography of social movements, shows how logics of horizontal networking are inscribed into the organizational architectures of translocal anti-corporate movements, from the World Social Forum to People’s Global Action and Indymedia – in this sense, networking can function as a democratising imperative within social movements. Keck and Sikkink (1998: 241), in their influential study of transnational advocacy networks, echo this when they depict “modern networks...[as] vehicles for communicative and political exchange, with the potential for mutual transformation of participants”. In these accounts and others, networks have become the *de facto* spatiality of social movements, figuring as a precondition and an infrastructure for social



movements, and as an epistemic space through which to theorise the contested politics of social movements.

In exploring the distinctive contribution that assemblage might offer to accounts of spatiality within social movement, I will draw on the example of an urban social movement from Mumbai to elaborate on translocal assemblage. This urban movement, focussed on housing within informal settlements, is known as Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), and I draw especially on the Indian chapter of this movement – the Alliance - where much of the work of the movement started and which remains central to the movement more generally. The paper reflects on fieldwork conducted over several research visits to Mumbai, and especially two trips between November 2005 and June 2006 and October 2001 and March 2002. This research has focused on informal settlements, infrastructure and social justice, and has involved a wide range of interviews with state officials, NGOs and CBOs. This has included repeated interviews and meetings with members of the Indian Alliance and other members of SDI including donors and partner groups in different cities and countries, as well as analysis of key grey literature produced by the movement over the past 20 years about their work. The vast majority of these interviews took place in Mumbai and – in the case of SDI - other Alliance-linked sites in India, with some additional interviews in the UK with SDI partners and supporters. In India, interviews took place with several members of the Alliance’s leadership and community members, and with over 30 associated members. Repeated interviews took place over several visits with the core Alliance leadership, meaning that the interview material focussed more on SDI leadership rather than grassroots membership, although not exclusively so. I consider some of the consequences for this for thinking about assemblages and social movements in the conclusion.

### **The housing assemblage**

SDI is a learning movement based around a structure of exchanges, involving small groups of the urban poor travelling from one urban settlement to another to share knowledge in what amounts to an informal learning process. The movement espouses a range of techniques that its leaders describe as indispensable to a development process driven by the urban poor. These include daily savings schemes, exhibitions of model house and toilet blocks, the enumeration of poor people's settlements, training programmes of exchanges, and a variety of other tactics. Operating often in the context of a failure - deliberate or otherwise - of the state to ensure collective provision of infrastructure, services and housing, SDI groups attempt to deal with the crisis of social reproduction in many cities of the global South.

A key organising strategy of SDI's is the construction and exhibition of full-size model houses. This process of construction and exhibition, which incorporates designs by organisations operating within informal settlements, has circulated many of the more than twenty countries in which SDI is based. Models and exhibitions hijack a middle-class activity (Appadurai, 2002) and visibly dramatise the crisis of urban social reproduction, and are accompanied by informal discussions ranging from concerns over land tenure to construction or local organising. Models draw on domestic geographical imaginations and reflect a particular construction of the poor and of social change in SDI (McFarlane, 2004, 2008). In particular, they put the capacities and skills of the poor on public demonstration, creating an urban spectacle through which the poor are cast as entrepreneurial and capable of managing their own development. Figure 1 below shows an image of a SDI model house built for exhibition in Nairobi.

**Figure 1: Model house, Nairobi (People's Dialogue, 2004)**

Stories about how to construct model houses circulate SDI through an organised system of 'horizontal exchanges' through which groups of the urban poor from different cities share ideas and experiences. In exchanges, visiting groups often join-in on constructions and exhibitions as they are going on. Strategies of measurement, or particular construction techniques, travel between sites during and after exchanges. For example, one strategy for people unfamiliar with tape measurers is to use clothes such as a sari as a measurement device. Small-scale models, writes the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, an SDI partner, are often deployed as "a three-dimensional imagining tool for people unfamiliar with the abstraction of scale drawings" (ACHR, 2001: 13). The models are expressions of geographical imaginaries of the home. ACHR go on to describe one exhibition in Thailand: "As the model went up, the people pulled out boards, nailed things up differently, changed this, argued about that. Measurements altered, ceiling heights were raised then lowered, window positions shifted, bathrooms and kitchens swelled then shrunk" (*ibid*). Models become the basis for negotiations around the kind of houses people want to live in, a process in which the collective will must be weighed against individual preferences, and which is subject to a range of social and cultural specificities and alterations.

Through these travelling encounters between cities as different as Cape Town, Phnom Penh and Mumbai, SDI's work is a relational product that combines the codified and tacit, the social and the material, and the 'here' and 'there'. The practices involved in constructing, adapting and putting models to use is a process of learning through practice that sits alongside practices of lobbying, fund raising, state and donor negotiations, modes of solidarity, and so on. Disparate knowledges and forms of identification, from

construction techniques to particular notions of the poor and social change, circulate exchanges. In short, ‘horizontal exchanges’, as they are often referred to in SDI, are translocal assemblages of materials, practices, designs, knowledge, personal stories, local histories and preferences, and an infrastructure of resources, fund-raising, and state and donor connections. Here, assemblage places an emphasis on agency, on the bringing together or forging alignments (Li, 2007) between the social and material, and between different sites. As relational products that exceed the connections between sites, SDI member groups are translocal assemblages that are place-focussed but not delimited to place.

In SDI, the local context is the object of struggle. As a placed-based but not place-restricted movement, SDI’s work resonates with Routledge’s (2003) description of ‘convergence spaces’<sup>2</sup>. Its leaders articulate an entrepreneurial form of collectivist politics which emphasises the capacities and skills of the urban poor. This collectivist politics differs from Cumbers *et al*’s (2008) discussion of ‘Global Justice Networks’ as bound by opposition to neoliberalism (and see Featherstone, 2008). SDI’s politics is less oppositional and is situated within existing local political economic frameworks through which it seeks to leverage space for the poor in urban planning and poverty reduction.

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<sup>2</sup> Routledge (2003) argues that a convergence space comprises a heterogeneous affinity between various social formations, such as social movements. By participating in spaces of convergence, “activists from participant movements embody their particular places of political, cultural, economic and ecological experience with common concerns, which lead to expanded spatiotemporal horizons of action” (Routledge, 2003: 346). He argues that convergence spaces comprise diverse social movements that articulate collective visions, facilitate uneven processes of facilitation and interaction, facilitate multi-scalar political action by participant movements, and that are comprised of contested social relations.

SDI is a series of overlapping translocal assemblages that conjoin in different ways at different times. For example, the South African Alliance, another SDI group member, have been very closely linked to the Indian Alliance over the past 15 years or so, and the relations between these two translocal assemblages has changed during that time depending on what was deemed important, whether in constructing model houses, or developing community toilet block designs, or discussing fund-raising strategies or negotiating strategies with the state, or in planning how best to conduct local savings schemes within informal settlements. The spatialities of translocal assemblages, as I will argue in the next section, need to be understood through an open relational topology that is alert both to the multiple spatial imaginaries and practices that SDI activists deploy.

### **Relational topologies of assemblage**

In emphasising translocal assemblages as a means of conceptualising SDI's spatialities, I am not advertising any particular spatial imaginary, whether networked or scalar. Instead, understanding SDI's spatial imaginaries and practices requires an openness to how actors construct and move between different spatialities, and assemblage is a useful lens for retaining this openness. Indeed, a topological conception of spatiality, I would argue, should be attentive to how scale or network, as particular spatial imaginaries, become key devices used by actors as they attempt to structure or narrate assemblages (Legg, forthcoming; Leitner, *et al*, 2008). While recent debates in geography have focussed on the possible abandonment of scalar vocabularies in favour of, for instance, networks, mobilities, or flat ontologies (see Marston *et al*, 2005; Collinge, 2006; Escobar, 2006; Jonas, 2006; Leitner and Miller, 2007; Jones *et al*, 2007), refusing to use scalar concepts is a fruitless strategy given the prevalence of scalar narratives of political, economic, social and environmental relations that we encounter as researchers on a daily basis. As Allen

and Cochrane (2007) have argued in relation to their work on regions, the politics of scale is an epistemological fact, often deployed as a means of capturing or rationalising tangled, dispersed assemblages (and see Brenner, 2000; Swyngedouw, 1997, 2000). As Leitner *et al* (2008: 158, 165) write in their study of the spatialities of contentious politics: “Participants in contentious politics are enormously creative in cobbling together different spatial imaginaries and strategies on the fly...yet the co-implication of these diverse spatialities remains at times underexposed, in the face of the tendency in contemporary geographic scholarship either to privilege one particular spatiality, or to subsume diverse spatialities under a single master concept”.

SDI members, for example, regularly construct scalar hierarchies of priorities in relation to political engagement, hierarchies that emphasise the paramount importance for them of the ‘local’. For SDI leaders, scale is neither ontology nor necessarily a vertical hierarchy that runs from the global to the body. In geography, different conceptualisations of scale have been deployed in a variety of ways, and can be broadly split into accounts that deploy scale as an object of analysis (e.g. often with the guiding question, how do social relations produce scale?) and scale as a narrative aid, and it is in this second sense that SDI activists use scale when they produce scalar hierarchies that privilege the local over the global. Actor-network theorist John Law (2000, 2004) usefully refers to scalar hierarchies of priorities as *transitivities*. Using a mathematical sense of the term, Law defines transitivity as referring to a set of relations in sequential order. Transitivity is the production of order through a hierarchy, a “distribution that performs itself” (Law, 2000a: 344). SDI leaders, especially as they increasingly engage in global advocacy, attempt to construct scalar transitivities that reflect their priorities. Indeed, their route into global advocacy is often through reifying the local as the object of struggle for SDI members, and the distribution that runs hierarchically from local to

national to global. Patel, Burra, and D'Cruz (2001: 59), three SDI leaders, write for example that “when lessons are taken from the local to the global [for example, in engagements with UN Habitat], this is to ensure that the experience of the global provides benefit to and strengthens the local”, and that “in spite of current global explorations, the focus of the network will continue to be upon the local...[SDI] is not a global process that focuses on international policies and practices, but it is global in outreach and strengthens groups” (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001: 58-59). At other moments, SDI leaders use geographical imaginaries of particular scales – for example, the home, in the shape of community designed models – as a basis for lobbying at the ‘global scale’. One bold example of this combination was the construction by SDI activists of a full-sized model house in the lobby of the UN’s New York headquarters during the 2001 Habitat conference (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: SDI model house in lobby of UN, New York (Homeless International, 2001)**

Scalar epistemologies influence political strategies and inflect the nature of particular spaces of political engagement. For example, SDI activists are forced to ask how much time and effort they should spend lobbying the UN or World Bank when they could be arranging meetings with local municipalities or supporting local groups. As an organising narrative, scale is one means through which SDI leader seek to structure and communicate the nature of SDI’s work. But scale does not operate as a master narrative for SDI. The metaphor of network is also strategically deployed by the movement’s leaders, for instance in their invocation of SDI as ‘horizontal’ and non-hierarchical, and this use of horizontality is itself attractive to donors and advocates of SDI (and on the seduction of networks, see Henry *et al*, 2004; Thompson, 2004). SDI’s work entails a constant shifting and sifting of spatial imaginaries of networks, hierarchies, and scales.

These narratives can serve to metaphorically capture, unite and make singular – if only temporarily – translocal assemblages. These metaphors also contrast with the spatial metaphors deployed by activists in SDI who aren't leaders when they speak of the movement. Activists, for example in relation to the Mumbai groups, might speak of 'Federation' or 'Mahila Milan' (meaning 'Women Together' in Hindi). Different spatial metaphors - which themselves have different influences, appeal and temporality - reflect distinct narratives and imaginaries of assemblages.

Assemblage offers the possibility of moving away from particular spatial master concepts – which often structure the discussion of space in relation to social movements – and in this sense offer one potential response to Leitner *et al's* (2008) call. To echo Doreen Massey (2005: 189, 100), the view of space at work here is less space as resultant formation and more as a “multiplicity of stories-so-far...The openended interweaving of a multiplicity of trajectories (themselves thereby in transformation), the concomitant fractures, ruptures and structural divides”, which makes space “so unamenable to a single totalising project”. If this points to a relational topology of translocal assemblage as “coeval becomings”, in Massey's (2005: 189) phrasing, it is nonetheless structured through power relations and information control, and it is to these powers of assemblage that I now turn.

### **Powers of assemblage**

Translocal learning assemblages are structured through various forms of power relation and resource and information control. There are, of course, a variety of theoretical resources for conceptualising the role of power across distances in social movements. As part of this relational topology, I argue for an understanding of translocal power that draws on but that seeks to move beyond any singular conception of power, whether of



hegemony or governmentality – the predominant ways in which power-over-distance is theorised in accounts of social movements as networks. There is not the space to review these accounts here, but in general terms these two broad approaches entail particular assumptions about how the ‘near’ and ‘far’ are connected.

Accounts of hegemony have deployed or echoed particular readings of both Gramsci and Foucault. Neo-Gramscian perspectives, for example, emphasise the relationship between powerful institutions, states, and ideas (Boas and McNeill, 2004; Taylor, 2004). The argument here is often to identify neoliberalism as a largely coherent project: a hegemonic ideology that seeks to ferment consensus around discourses such as 'good governance' based on coercion and consent (Taylor 2004). In these accounts, power radiates from an authoritative centre that instils stability and order by recasting the periphery in its own image, and the assumption is that power is effective and extensive. We are told little about how power is exercised at distance. This has echoes of what Allen (2003; 2004), in his work on power, has called the ‘powers of the centre’, an epistemological move where the capacity to do something comes to stand for the actual exercise of power, often implying rather than explaining what actually goes on in the operation of power.

In accounts of power-as- governmentality within literature on social movements, power is identified in relation to new forms of conduct, behaviour and ethics around ideas of a particular (often Western) modernity (e.g. civilization, progress, rationality) (e.g. Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994, 2006; Watts, 2003). These readings are particularly concerned with the ways in which certain ‘problems’ are rendered by the state, international agencies or social movement leaders through certain discursive performances, and the ways in which particular ‘solutions’ are posed in response. This entails close study of the practices

through which modes of power are articulated and contested through different sites and institutions, rather than conceiving of different agents as necessarily operating in separate arenas. This allows, first, the possibility of different forms of power operating simultaneously, including those that may contradict one another (e.g. conformity and resistance; control and bargaining), and, second, the possibility that power can operate across sites in ways that problematises analytic divisions like global-local, or state-civil society. However, there is an occasional tendency to reduce social action and subjectivity to effects, and there is little scope for the pro-active role of short and long-term individual and collective action in provoking changes in modes of development, policy or regulation (see Barnett, 2005, on neoliberalism).

In SDP's translocal assemblages, there may be multiple forms of power involved at different times, not all of which are necessarily translocal in reach, and which become stabilised or contested in different ways. Allen's (2003) work usefully points to a range of different powers, including domination, authority, manipulation, and seduction, all of which are different in their character and reach. Domination works to quickly close down choices and may be more effective across distance, while authority works most effectively through proximity and presence, drawing people into line on a daily basis and seeking the internalization of particular norms. Authority's need for constant recognition means that the more direct the presence, the more direct the impact. Conversely, the larger the number of outside interests to negotiate, the more varied the mix of resources, the greater the potential for authority to be disrupted. Manipulation can have a greater spatial reach than authority partly because it may involve the concealment of intent, such as in a corporate advertising campaign or corporate development intervention, and partly because it does not require the internalisation of norms. Seduction is a more modest form of power that can operate successfully with spatial reach, "where the possibility of

rejection or indifference are central to its exercise” (Allen, 2004: 25). These different modes of power are mediated in space and time, so that manipulation may become (or may be misread as), for instance, seduction or authority.

There are of course many other modes of power. Inducement may involve financial incentives to obtain compliance, such as in state contracting of NGOs (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002), while coercion may include monitoring or target-setting, for example in donor aid monitoring of states or NGOs (Mawdsley *et al*, 2001). Power may be instrumental, a series of actions designed to make others act in ways that would they otherwise have not, or associational, involving the formation of a common will. These different modes of power work alongside, build on, and extend accounts of power over distance as hegemony or governmentality, but most importantly they emphasise the multiple and often simultaneous transformation of power across space, and it is in this sense that it is useful for a relational topology of translocal assemblages.

Power operates in multiple ways though SDI’s travelling strategies such as exhibition, influenced by personal and group relations and perceptions. Exhibition can act as a form of *seduction*, recruiting local people to SDI groups by raising curiosity around a high-profile and unusual event - this is the case in Mumbai, for example. Model houses travel as part of exchanges and can act as a form of *inducement* for other SDI groups in other countries. At a more general level, the Mumbai SDI group - the Alliance - has come to represent for many SDI groups a kind of authority in SDI, as an originator and crucible of ideas. In interview, some comments from key Indian Alliance members appeared to indicate a tendency to view knowledge and ideas as disseminating *from* Mumbai across SDI. For example, one Mumbai leader said: “What you have to do is see Mumbai as a hub that’s like the crucible. All the new ideas [e.g. housing exhibitions, enumerations,

savings]...it's the most difficult place to work...the size of the city, the scale of the problem, a very dense environment...If you can solve something in Mumbai you can solve it in other places, and that's one of the reasons that we are not anywhere else". On another occasion, the same leader referred to Mumbai as "the mother base", while other Mumbai leaders have referred to the Alliance as a "model" that is being adopted across SDI. This narrative can be described as a form of power that is both manipulative and associational. It is manipulative in that it is presented as a neutral set of facts and constitutes a simple message with extensive spatial reach. It is associational in that it involves an attempt to constitute a common agreement or shared will, i.e. that the Mumbai Alliance should lead the movement. While the Mumbai Alliance has certainly been the source of many of the strategies circulating SDI, to say that it has driven or caused SDI activities in this way is an exaggeration that speaks to an ongoing debate in SDI over the extent of influence of the Indian group over the direction of the movement.

While knowledge is explicitly conceived by SDI leaders as changing as it travels, in practice groups occasionally attempt a direct copying of what they have seen elsewhere. But if we shift from the Mumbai office of the SDI leader quoted above to a different SDI site, we see associational power being contested. For example, in the Piesang River area of South Africa a member of the SDI group, the Homeless People's Housing Federation, "explained that the visitors from India had advised them to build communal water points, as a collective space where women could talk about the Federation – however, the Federation women of Piesang River had their minds set on the conventional on-site access to water, and this had remained their demand" (Huchzermeyer, 1999: unpublished, no pagination). This indicates a tension in SDI that can be understood as forms of micro-resistance to associational power: on the one hand,

SDI seeks to encourage autonomy and change as knowledge travels; on the other hand, there is the possibility of travelling knowledge marginalising local concerns, and in this context charismatic leaders can play an ambivalent role in exchanges.

Within SDI member groups, particular groups of people have become more influential, and if not controlling the direction of the movement they certainly contribute far more than other groups. For example, some people have become key illustrators of the movement's strategies. The Asian Coalition of Housing Rights, an SDI partner, has described these groups as "vanguard communities", key actors in SDI that play an important role in mediating learning about key strategies in different sites across SDI (daily savings, enumeration etc) by circulating exchanges:

The ones up at the front of the line, the innovators, the risk takers, the go-getters. So in Bombay, you have your Byculla Mahila Milan [Woman Together], and in Pune [India] there's Rajendranagar. Then South Africa has its Philippi and Zimbabwe has its Mbare. In Phnom Penh you have Toul Svay Prey and in the Philippines it's Payatas. These communities become demonstration centers and hosts of innumerable exchange visits (ACHR, 2000: 9).

The use of these kinds of groups in exchange has the consequence of implying that these are more learned and worldly members of SDI, and certainly reflects the organisational resource dominance of particular people in SDI who constitute what Cumbers *et al* (2008: 196) refer to as "imagineers" – key organising and communicative activists within social movements. The discursive construction of these groups entails the simultaneous expression of seductive power, manipulation and inducement. It is seductive in that is a modest form of power that can operate successfully with spatial reach, "where the possibility of rejection or indifference are central to its exercise" (Allen, 2004: 25). It is manipulative in that it seeks to reproduce a similar set of discourses and practices across

the movement through attributing the status of ‘teacher’ to particular groups. Finally, it constitutes inducement in that it presents a set of incentives in the form of ‘do as we say, and a better life is possible’.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined a particular conception of translocal assemblages by drawing on one distinct urban social movement based in and beyond Mumbai. The work of these groups is based predominantly on forms of group exchange involving people, materials, resources, histories, and struggles, and calls for an approach that works with more multiple conceptions of space and power than is often the case in accounts of social movements (and see Leitner, *et al*, 2008). In closing, I will highlight four broad potential implications of the analytic of translocal assemblage for understanding social movements.

First, translocal assemblage is a relational analytic that is open to multiple spatial imaginaries and practices. It does not privilege a particular master concept, such as network or scale. Rather, it is open to how different actors and activists narrativise assemblages through spatial metaphors and organising logics of, for example, scale, network, federation and so on. In this sense, retaining assemblage as a broad descriptor responds to Leitner *et al*’s (2008) call for geographers to be more attentive to the multiple spatial imaginaries that the people we research themselves deploy.

Second, if ‘network’ is the lens generally used to conceptualise the spatialities of social movements, assemblage potentially offers a different emphasis. In particular, unlike network, assemblage does more than emphasise a set of connections between sites in that it draws attention to history, labour, materiality and performance. Assemblage points to reassembling and disassembling, to dispersion and transformation, processes

often overlooked in network accounts. In part, this means translocal assemblage can go some way to resolving the tension of interiority / exteriority that often surfaces in accounts of networks, because translocal assemblages emerge in part through the incorporation of exteriorities – for example in the production of political stances or knowledges. For instance, the Indian Alliance often distinguishes its work from other, more leftist urban movements in Mumbai, and in doing so that particular exteriority enters into the constitution of the Alliance as translocal assemblages (both De Landa, 2006, and Bennett, 2005, briefly discuss exteriority and assemblage).

Third, the analytic of translocal assemblage clearly has implications for how we conceive agency in social movements. As Jane Bennett (2005) argues, assemblage focuses attention on the distributive and composite nature of agency. This is an agency both of sums and distinctive parts. Bennett uses Deleuze's notion of 'adsorption' to capture this – a gathering of elements in way that both forms a coalition and yet preserves something of the agency or impetus of each element. In addition, assemblages are emergent, nonlinear and processual rather than resultant formations, placing agency less in the realm of direct causes and more in the realm of sources which come together in particular events (such as housing exhibitions in the case of SDI). Tania Murray Li (2007: 285) echoes this by drawing attention to Deleuze and Guattari's reading of diffused agency in which material content (e.g. bodies, actions, and passions) and enunciations (e.g. statements, plans and laws) are linked not in linear fashion but rhizomatically as reciprocal presuppositions and mutual connections play themselves out in the constitution of the social field.

However, the question of agency also points to a danger with assemblage. In conceiving agency as distributed socially, spatially and materially, there is the risk of failing to identify important actors or key explanatory causes in social movements. In this sense,

assemblage focuses attention more on the ‘how’ questions rather than the ‘why’ questions. In accounts of assemblage, there is a tension between a materialist ontology that emphasises distribution of agency, and a tendency to centre the human, or groups of humans, as the basis or arbiter of causation and responsibility. This is a tension which my own account speaks to – in order to examine the spatialities of the urban movements I have discussed in this paper, I have returned to particular people, leaders, and voices within the movements to illustrate my case, reflecting particular methodological and analytical choices. Assemblage, then, is a useful frame for thinking the problem of agency in accounts of social movements or indeed politics more generally, presenting at its simplest level a choice between an exploratory materialist ontology or a resurfacing of human causality and responsibility.

Fourth, and finally, translocal assemblage offers a distinctive reading of social movements, in that it forces attention on who or what has the *capacity* to assemble. In a given social movement, different people have more or less capacity to call upon financial resources or personal contacts, to speak from a position of authority, or to promote or participate in the practices that go on. In this sense, assemblage is both an analytic and a resource mediated by power and characterised by changing relations of stability and flux. For example, many urban social movements in Mumbai are mobilised and led by middle-class activists in positions of relative power, with particular formal educational attainments, connections in government or with donors, and distinct resources that they can draw upon.



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